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C O N F I D E N T I A L TBILISI 002438

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2018  
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL AR GG  
SUBJECT: GEORGIAN PATRIARCH ON CHURCH DISPUTE WITH ARMENIA

REF: A. TBILISI 2411  
¶B. YEREVAN 1003

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary/Comment: Ambassador raised the ongoing dispute over Norashen church in Tbilisi with Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II on December 22. The Georgian Patriarch seemed open and willing to resolve contentious issues and noted the Georgian priest who was involved in moving gravestones while clearing the courtyard has been removed. Ilia II said the issues of church ownership between the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) are complicated. He expressed his hope that a new commission, discussed during the Armenian Prime Minister's visit to Tbilisi in December (reftel), would examine the issues at the Norashen Church and general church ownership issues under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture in order to find agreeable solutions for all sides.  
End Summary/Comment.

Invite Me to Tbilisi

¶2. (C) Ilia II told the Ambassador that he met with Karekin II (Supreme Patriarch and Catolicos of All Armenians) in Moscow while at the funeral of Russian Patriarch Alexei II. Ilia II said Karekin II raised the issue of the Norashen Church and said he wanted it solved as soon as possible. According to Ilia II, Karekin II was very impatient, saying that he should be invited to Tbilisi immediately and the Norashen church handed over to him directly. Ilia II replied that a commission has been set up to look into the issue and scientists, historians, and others should offer their assessments before any decision is taken. Apparently, Karekin II dismissed the idea of the commission and said that in his view Ilia II is the sole decision maker on such issues. Ilia II expressed his intention to go forward with the commission.

Ilia II Set to Compromise

¶3. (C) Ilia II stated that the Norashen church issue is complicated, but compromises can be worked out. He suggested that the wisest choice is to turn the disputed church into a museum. Ilia II told the Ambassador that the priest who initiated the controversy has been dismissed; the tombstones have been fixed; and the fence issue was "solved". He also said Karekin II has been deliberately stirring up dissatisfaction among his followers on this issue. He further told Ambassador that Karekin II's impatience is due in part to Russian influence as Karekin II's brother is a bishop in Moscow. (Embassy Note: We have not confirmed this information, nor did Ilia II elaborate on what influence Russia is exerting on Karekin II. End Note.) Ilia II said he preferred Karekin II's predecessor's approach to church ownership and other issues between the GOC and AAC. According to Ilia II, the previous Catolicos was reluctant to risk bad relations over what amounts to "disputes over one or two churches." Ilia II promised to keep Ambassador abreast of any further developments.

TEFFT